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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: GOT RELEASES 55 AN-NAHDHA PRISONERS

REF: A. TUNIS 2298

[1](#)B. TUNIS 1658

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On November 4, President Ben Ali pardoned an unspecified number of prisoners on the occasion of the November 7 holiday marking his accession to power in 1987. Among those released were 55 prisoners that had been imprisoned on charges related to their membership in the banned Tunisian Islamist party An-Nahdha. To the disappointment of the activist community, Mohamed Abbou, Tunisia's most famous political prisoner, was not released, despite a one-day hunger strike his wife and family members of other political prisoners undertook on October 26. However, at the same time that the number of An-Nahdha prisoners dwindles, a new caseload of young Tunisian Islamists jailed under the 2003 anti-terrorism law has increased. End Summary.

Islamists Released

[1](#)2. (C) On November 4, the official GOT press agency reported that President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali had pardoned a "certain number" of detainees, and granted "conditional liberty" (i.e. parole) to others. Prisoner releases around national holidays -- November 7 marked the 19 anniversary of Ben Ali's accession to power -- are common, although the GOT rarely releases information about specific prisoners that are released. According to multiple sources, including international press reports and the website of banned Tunisian Islamist party An-Nahdha, 55 of those released on November 4 had been in prison on charges related to their membership in the banned Tunisian Islamist political party An-Nahdha. Five of those released, including two former An-Nahdha presidents, Habib Ellouze and Mohamed Akrouit, had been sentenced to life in prison, although Akrouit's sentence was later reduced to thirty years. Akrouit and Ellouze had been sentenced in 1992 for alleged participation in a plot to overthrow the Ben Ali regime. Akrouit and Ellouze, like many of the sextegenarian and septegenarian An-Nahdha prisoners, have reportedly suffered from poor health during their time in prison, exacerbated by periodic hunger strikes undertaken to protest their imprisonment. Ellouze is reportedly nearly blind, while Akrouit suffers from a heart condition.

Out With the Old, In With the New

[1](#)3. (C//NF) The announcement was met with appreciation by members the Tunisian human rights community, although many activists highlighted the continued detention of some 150

An-Nahdha prisoners as well as younger Tunisians arrested on terrorism-related charges. At the same time as the An-Nahdha prison caseload lessens, the number of these young Tunisian Islamists in prison has increased greatly, according to lawyers and the ICRC. The Tunis-based International Association for the Support of Political Prisoners (AISPP) counts more than 400 prisoners or detainees in this caseload.

Among these young Tunisians, the more moderate political ideas of older An-Nahdha leaders have been rejected and exchanged for support for jihad and a desire, in the words of an ICRC official who had interviewed many such detainees, "to bring the caliphate back."

Despite Wife's Hunger Strike,
Abbou Not Among Those Released

4.(C) Notable by his absence from the list of those released on November 4 was Mohamed Abbou, the lawyer/activist and Tunisian human rights movement symbol who was sentenced in March 2005 to a three and half year sentence for a trumped-up assault charge and "spreading false news and inciting public disorder" following the on-line publication of articles comparing Tunisia's prisons to Abu Ghraib and Tunisian president Ben Ali to Ariel Sharon (Ref B). Abbou's wife Samia Abbou conducted a 24-hour symbolic sit-in/hunger strike on October 26, the final day of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, with wives and family members of other political prisoners. Following the hunger strike, according to Samia Abbou, police pressure and surveillance of her and her family intensified. Samia Abbou has often complained about police harassment of her and her family, which has allegedly occurred at varying degrees since her husband's detention and her subsequent public efforts to have him released. Other participants in the hunger strike, including Sihem Najjar, wife of An-Nahdha prisoner Hatem Zarrouk, were allegedly assaulted by police. However, Zarrouk was among those released on November 4.

Islamist Leaders: Released From One Prison Into Another

15. (C) In conversations with Emboffs, and in communiques, Islamist leaders such as Hamadi Jebali (Ref A), Zied Doulatli, and Ali Laaridh, themselves beneficiaries of Presidential pardons in the past two years, have complained about GOT restrictions and measures meant to limit and monitor their political activity. In the words of Jebali, they moved "from a small prison to a large one." Many of these prisoners are subjected to "administrative control", that constitutes a type of internal exile. In a recent communique, Jebali complained that police pressure had forced the cancellation of his daughter's wedding. He also protested constant and intrusive police surveillance.

Comment

16. (C) The GOT is slowly getting rid of its An-Nahdha "prisoner problem," a problem that has resulted in constant pressure from domestic and international NGOs and foreign governments with human rights agendas. While many of the released prisoners were serving the last years of their sentences, and were due to be released soon anyway, the release of prisoners who had been handed life sentences surprised observers. Perhaps with the continued release of An-Nahdha prisoners, and the increased detention of young alleged jihadists, the GOT is conceding that, while An-Nahdha may pose a political threat, there are in fact "worse" Islamists, in security terms, roaming the Tunisian streets. However, since political threats are often given equal, if not greater, attention by the regime as security, the recently released An-Nahdha prisoners can expect to be watched closely, and to be prevented from any significant mobilizing activity.

